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# Mediensprache und Medienkommunikation

im interdisziplinären und  
interkulturellen Vergleich

Mit einem einleitenden Beitrag  
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## **Television news discourse**

In this paper, the author develops the narrative approach to TV news discourse as follows: with the categories of the narrator, the “voices” of the narrator, points of view, the composition of narrative, and the recipient's image. A brief review of the basic peculiarities of the Russian discourse is given as an illustration.

The media text is a communicative formation that has an ideological nature. It acts to form and change the mental model of the world in the recipient's mind. Such a recipient is now a certain social group whose members have similar socio-cultural characteristics. The model of the world that exists in the collective consciousness is of a regulatory nature that largely determines the behaviour of the group. The function of informing of the real events is becoming minor.

The functional significance of the media language elements is not focused mainly on the meaning, but on the sense that arises in the recipient's interpretation. Interpretation is understood as reflection in the course of connecting the content of messages and personal experience, in which individual moral values are of primary importance. They form the mythological matrix of consciousness.

Television news discourse is studied by sociologists and linguists alike. Linguists are interested in the arsenal of semantic, morphological, syntactic and phonological means of creating variability. These methods are used to construct the information space of television news, to decipher the television news code and to estimate the possibility of manipulating the recipient's consciousness. The “hidden ideologizing” and the “distortion of reality” are considered as constants of news discourse.

The most common practice is to use discourse analysis, based on the model set by van Dijk (1988), where phased analysis arises to the analysis of macro and superstructures. In most cases, a separate new item is chosen as the object of studies instead of the whole programme. Indeed, the subject of discussion is just a single event, not the entire news programme. The question is how and to what extent its interpretation is influenced by the “grammar” of discourse (a place in the sequence of topics, duration, means of mainstreaming).

The conceptual content of the text is modelled. The integrity does not exist by itself through a chronological framework ("In our programme you will learn about today's events in the country and the world", *Vremya*), but is the result of the meeting of two consciousnesses (Bakhtin 1975), and the system of priorities is formed in the course of discussing mass media information with other people.

Means of different modalities are united and they interact, thus there is a certain format in which this unity is implemented. Following Altheide/Snow (1979), we define 'format' as "the frame or perspective which is used to present or interpret certain phenomena". The format is designed to form a recipient's attitude through the implementation of the complex of communication strategies in media reality. The format specifies the way of structuring space-time relations in this reality and defines the peculiarities of communication.

The realization of the basic function is possible only if a news programme forms a *united* text in spite of the fact that virtual discourse is "a set of communicative fragments, acting as a total field, not consolidated as a centrally built system" (Gasparov 1996, p. 164). Field structure enables researchers to use such concepts as "hypertext" (Kiriya 2007) for television news, although in the foreground we find such characteristics as openness and a potential for variation of its structural and semantic units (topics). In the traditional understanding of the term, the nonlinear nature of hypertext is determined by the recipient's freedom in the structuring of the perceived information.

However, this freedom is limited, and the television programme "Vremya", before the presidential election in 2000, can be an example of this limitation. In that programme the significance of particular topics was formed at the level of superstructures: the opening of a children's judo school (this kind of sport is an element of Putin's image), the arrest of corrupt police officials, and the elimination of an emergency situation. The protagonists are members of the interregional movement "Edinstvo" ('Unity'): the famous wrestler Alexander Karelin, the head of EMERCOM of Russia (Emergency Control Ministry of Russia) Sergei Shoigu, and a fighter against organized crime, Aleksandr Gurov. Thus, the movement "Edinstvo" that supports Putin's candidacy creates in the recipient's mind an image that guarantees security, order, and justice. Creating the myth of the "apocalyptic", Putin's resignation in the autumn of 2007 was implemented even less professionally, when separate fragments were grouped thematically in the format of "soft news". The comments of "actors" representing different social groups formed the semantic centre of the news.

A news programme is a collection of consecutive messages about events that implies the division of the continuum into episodes that have a localization in time and space, i.e. the narration (story). This is a sufficient reason for understanding a news programme with the help of the following categories of narrative analysis: 1) the narrator, (who implements the strategies of informing and/or persuading with the help of “voices” and “points of view”), 2) the composition of narration, and 3) the recipient, who chooses a strategy of agreement/disagreement or removal. The analysis of a category is not autonomous, it is a way of entering the “hermeneutic circle” of media texts.

The narrator's aim is to construct a holistic picture of the world in the recipient's consciousness using a sequence of separate event fragments. The importance of the message is imposed by the format (an event is something that changes the existing picture of the world). It requires understanding (the information is transferred from the sphere of knowledge to the sphere of the recipient's belief). Deryabin (1998) characterizes this communication strategy as a “discursive sublimation”, where an ascending from the speech genre of “anecdote” to the genre of “parable” is taking place, with the characteristic change of “voices” and the narrator's social roles.

This is also reflected in the clearly organized formal and content structure of discourse (Heinderyckx 1993). The functionality of each structural element of discourse is strictly defined and it is adequate to the hierarchy of “voices” corresponding to these elements. A newsreader in the studio is an auctorial narrator, the bearer of objective knowledge. The information reported by him imposes the chronotopical framework of the events (framing). The linguistic means used must be deprived of emotional-evaluative connotations. Extra-linguistic conditions include a straight look into the camera and an unemotional voice. The reporter's function is a dynamic unfolding of the narration of the event (focusing). The significance of the event for a viewer is largely determined by the dominant strategy of perception of information (agreement/disagreement/compromise). An eyewitness or a direct participant (“actor”) is in the limelight, but not a reporter. It is the participant's estimation of events that can greatly affect a possible change in the strategy of a television viewer. The existing picture of the world can undergo conversion or consolidation (realizing). The final stage (closing) involves a greater degree of freedom because it has a special role in forming “the preferred meaning” (Hartley 1982). The role of the narrator can be played by a reporter, a newsperson or a “voice-over”.

Thus, the institutional roles of the narrator are distinguished by the degree of objectivity/subjectivity and the degree of involvement into the event that is

supported by an appropriate picture. Forming the narration structure, it is indispensable to take into account the intended strategy of the viewer's perception of information.

Western European TV journalism, both on public and private channels, declares the principle of maximum objectivity. It is assumed that the presented information is neutral and the facts are precise. Thus, the impression of the reporter's impartiality is created through the interviews with eyewitnesses who express different points of view. The channel "Euronews", for example, does not exclude the role of a studio newsman and a reporter, replacing them with voice-overs, and an "eyewitness" is replaced by an "actor". News programmes on the channel "Vesti – 24 hours" are constructed on a similar model. A craving for objectivity is manifested in the format "no comment" (which is a "brand" format for "Euronews"), where the verbal series is completely excluded. However, the independence of this way of presenting the news, that breaks the laws of narrative, is illusory. In fact, the event is understood only as being embedded in the context that contains the necessary information.

Some researchers note that in many cases the expected objectivity is of mythical nature. The communicative strategy of informing has the aim of achieving a "chorus of unanimity". However, it is a kind of abstraction because in reality the influence on the recipient is the sum of the vectors of different strategies. Each strategy is held by a certain narrator's type, with his proper rhetorical picture of the world: the imperative picture of the world is held by a studio newsman, the probability one is held by a reporter, the autoreference one is held by an eyewitness. Narration with its characteristic categories of time, space and modality cannot exist without the narrator's 'self', which is manifested in different ways. "The whole speech is totally oriented to the speaker's inner self, even if he does not call his name." (Bulgakov 2008, p. 160).

Forming the "preferred meaning" in the minds of the audience is implemented by means of visual and verbal codes that organize the structure of a news programme and particular topics (Hall 1982). The realization of the meaning requires the presentation of news items not only as a complex, but primarily as a sequence. The sequencing principles may be different (chronological, spatial, thematic). In TV programmes "hot news" is often combined with the news that is current for longer periods of time ("soft news") because of the limited time to prepare for broadcasting. It is revealed in the morning programmes, when the lack of fresh news is rather tangible, and the repetition of the evening news leads to a drop in the viewers' interest. However, the main task of the editor is to create the unity of the subject of narration (the actual picture of the world) and the unity of the preferred knowledge of it.

On Russian TV channels a news programme is rarely created as an integrated text that can be understood at the level of macro-positions. According to our observations, the main cause of this phenomenon is that the authors of the programmes on regional channels are short of any necessary knowledge in the theory of communication. The second reason is that the process of preparing news is primarily determined by the internal conditions of the channel, rather than external circumstances or even long-term goals. In any collision of professional standards with the logic of organization the conflict is resolved in favour of the operational rules (Epstein 1973). Financial dependence on regional administration is also of considerable significance. On Internet forums there are complaints mainly about an excess of stories dedicated to the activities of the regional administration that are of no interest for the mass audience.

On commercial channels the fragmentariness of news can be explained by the desire to improve the ratings of a channel (and consequently attract advertisers) through choosing topics of criminal, sensational or scandalous nature. Such news stories are consolidated in special programmes such as “Emergency” (NTV), “Rush Hour” (Ren-TV), “Emergency Call 112” (Channel Five), with advertisement units.

Discourse in Russian news programmes, which is closer to the American model than to the European one, has a number of basic features, mostly borrowed.

- 1) Sunday programmes (so-called information-analytical programmes) focus on the integration of information and entertainment functions. This phenomenon, which appeared as a reaction to the new ratings drop on U.S. television channels, is called “infotainment” (Postman 1985). In terms of narrative characteristics, the elements of dramatic discourse predominate over information discourse.

According to the rules of the genre, here the narrator (the reporter) plays a special role. Instead of an impersonal auctorial narrator, there is a personified narrator, in whose image the elements of different archetypes can be realized: from “a wise old man” to “a trickster”, in the tradition of post-modernism (“The Sunday Times” – Ekaterina Andreeva, Yulia Pankratova, Pyotr Tolstoy, “News of the Week with Evgeny Revenko” – ORT, “Week with Marianna Maksimovskaya” – REN-TV, “Today. Concluding programme with Kirill Pozdnyakov”, “The protagonist with Anton Hrekov” – NTV, “Postscriptum with Alexei Pushkov”, “In the thick of events with Anna Prokhorova” – TVC). “Personal myths” of popular TV presenters are created through their participation in other rating programmes of different genres (“Dancing with the Stars”, “While Everybody at Home”, etc.).

This approach fits the stereotypes of the traditional society, where the degree of the recipient's trust largely depends on his personal attitude to the narrator. That is why the final weekly broadcasts have a special role in the explication of "the preferred meaning" of the week's main events.

- 2) At the beginning of news programmes the news items are presented as "tabloids": expressive pictures are used, accompanied by catchy headlines ("My friends, how splendid is our union!"<sup>1</sup> (about Putin's speech at the summit in Portugal), "Asphaltization throughout the Country: Will Russia get rid of at least one of its troubles" (about new technologies in road construction; ORT, 28.10.2007). The use of intertextuality here is one of the main means of attracting attention. Transformation of precedent texts as a form of language play is not only a stylistic device that adds an element of entertainment or an ironic tone, but also a means of forming the recipient's image. The process of receiving information turns into a process of decoding, which increases the possibility of interpretation and carries away with the language game in the tradition of postmodernism. According to the rules of the game, the sources should be familiar, and therefore, the headlines are focused on recipients with specific socio-cultural background knowledge. In one case, the person has to be familiar with Russian classical literature and history, and in another case he or she must know slang vocabulary to understand the play on words ("We will provide the whole country with shoes":<sup>2</sup> Report from the galosh<sup>3</sup> capital of Russia; Fifth Channel, 23.01.2008).

Today on most television channels headlines are composed of two parts, the contents of which are in the explanatory (as in the examples above) or cause-effect relationship. In the latter case, one part defines the problem connected with the event, and this part is formed as an interrogative sentence. Being in preposition, it usually states a possible cause of the event, in postposition it specifies a possible consequence or a subsequent problem.

News announcements are becoming increasingly important in the composition of narratives. The nature of their presentation is becoming all the more appropriate for the "filmloop" perception of television programmes, and at the same time it contributes to the formation of this "filmloop" view. Emphasis on logic and intonation of the actual title section (topic-comment) is not the only way to attract the attention of the audience. Thus, in recent years the effect of dramatizing, a characteristic of "infotainment", is

<sup>1</sup> A quotation from a poem by A. Pushkin (translator's note).

<sup>2</sup> "Provide with shoes" (Rus.: *obut'*) means *to take in, snooker* (slang).

<sup>3</sup> In Russian there is a saying *ses't v galoshu* (lit.: sit into a galosh) that means *to get into a mess* (colloq.).

created by the interaction of the “voices” of the news reporter off-camera and the “actor” on-camera (the so-called “synchronous”). Some intrigue, which appears due to the imposition of imperative and autoreference pictures of the world in the title, arouses interest in the content of the whole news story, thus contributing to the implementation of the basic functions of the title. Also, importantly, a direct participant appears at the very beginning to neutralize a possible rejection of the information.

- 3) The principles of choosing topics and the manner of their presentation in the narrative clearly reflect the orientation towards the recipient's mental model and interests which express his latent needs (“We'll tell you about the most important and *interesting* events” – Seti NN). Thus, in recent years one can observe a retreat from the principles of structured narrative, even in such a ‘conservative’ news programme as “Vremya”: “The accident at the water pipes in Krasnokamsk” – “The trial of Major Evsyukov” – “A working day of President Medvedev” – “Olympic Games in Vancouver” – “A working day of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin” (ORT, 16.02.2010).

The commercialization of television on the one hand, and the declining interest in politics on the other, caused a desire to increase the audience with the help of the techniques which originally appeared in print media and became known as the “new journalism” (Meyer). These include the active use of stylistically marked elements, imitating live informal speech, which is beyond the norms of the literary language. As for video episodes, visual metaphors are widely used by reporters. Thus, in the news story, which tells of street currency exchange, the reporter takes the cashier's place, and the camera is located behind the clients' backs, at “the point of view” of an external observer. In a series of documentaries dealing with the problem of the distribution of the Road Fund of Russia's funds, a reporter, not touching the key part of the problem and not commenting on government decisions, “plays the role” of a long-distance driver, tired of frequent mechanical breakdowns.

Syntagmas with the meaning of subjective modality, metatext and intertext elements are also means of forming “the preferred meaning” in the verbal code. On Russian television, their use in a verbal sequence is not a privilege of the reporter. In most cases, the stylistic unity of the text, created by one narrator and distributed among the different “voices”, is evident.

At the turn of the century in our country, as in the United States, the news programmes ratings dropped, especially among the younger generation. It can be considered as a communicative failure resulting from an inadequate conception of the recipient's image in the current model of discourse. According to



the company TNS Global, the programmes on First Channel and ORT have the highest ratings among news programmes in Russia. It may testify to the conservatism of TV audience and the greater compliance of these programmes with the format.

In our opinion, the use of the principles and categories of narrative analysis as a variety of discursive analysis is the most relevant to the news format. The analysis of voluminous literature on television news shows that any aspects could be interpreted from these positions. The methods of narrative analysis can be applied in structuring the unity of the reference event (reported) and the communicative event (the event of the message itself). It enables television channels to formalize the procedures of creating united (both verbal and visual) news texts, adjusted for the expected recipient's image. In terms of interpreting news, narrative analysis makes it possible to describe the range of semiotic codes used in a programme, ascending to the essential characteristics of the hidden narrator (intentional, axiological, social-role characteristics).

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